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An Apple all day makes liminality okay: the influence of the iPhone on teenage girls' consumption practices.

Research into new technologies tends to paint a pessimistic picture of the future for family interaction with teens. Turkle (2011) worries we are living *"alone together"*, inhabiting parallel lives alongside, but not engaging with our children, who are increasingly intoxicated by technology. Similarly, Subrahmanyam & Greenfield (2008: 134) state: *"concern is growing that adolescents' extensive use of electronic communication to interact with their peers may impair their relations with their parents, siblings and other family members"* and there are concerns that internet behaviours by teens can be akin to addiction (Walsh 2010).

Smartphones (mobile phones with internet access) have made older teenagers' isolation from the family even easier, giving immediate 24/7 access to information and, importantly, their intimate and internet "friends" alike. Smartphone technologies are particularly attractive to this group, as this generation are arguably, the first true *"digital natives"*: born and brought up with technology (Margaryan et al 2011). Girls tend to communicate the most via mobile phones (Haste 2005, O'Doherty et al 2007). Older teenage girls are in a liminal space between teenager and adulthood, passing through: *"a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his [sic] past or coming state"* (Turner 1974). The value of liminality as a *"fruitful theoretical lens"* for examining consumption practices among younger female 'tweens' has been studied (Cody 2012) along with girl-tweens' *"anticipatory socialisation"* (Waerdahl 2005). Although older teens are preparing to move from school or college to university/gap year or work, much less is known about the liminal consumption practices of this group.

During this liminal phase, the mobile phone can act as a convenient tool, balancing familial influence and peer involvement. There is evidence that traditional mobile phones are improving family communications; electronic umbilical cords back to the family, creating perceptions of safety and notional closeness (Wilding 2006) but also postponing teens' independence (Turkle 2008). There has been some research into voice/text use amongst the young (Cawley & Hynes 2010, Axelsson 2010, Garcia-Montes et al 2006, Haste 2005). This paper will contribute to knowledge by understanding the influence of smartphone technology (via the leading brand, the iPhone) on older teenage girls' liminal consumption practices, including the extent to which these practices involve family as well as friends. After a review of literature, there follows a qualitative study into their demands on the iPhone, and resulting consumption practices, as teenage girls begin the transition to adult.

Literature Review - Liminal consumption practices and older teenage girls

Turner (1974) defined liminality as social changes during periods of transition which are characterised by three stages: separation from life before, the *"tunnel"* or *"mysterious darkness"* of change itself and finally, re-aggregation into a new more stable period. During liminality, the individual's identity, role and status are unclear and there becomes a sense of *"communitas"*; closeness between persons who are experiencing liminality together – hence the importance of peer relationships to teenagers. This confusing time leads to changes including patterns of consumption and transgression of new psychological borders, (Jenks 2003). Arnould & Thompson (2005), highlight the under use of liminality as a theoretical focus. Cody (April, July 2012) leads the way in addressing this neglect with her studies of "tweens", identifying three drivers of consumption practice: collective cohesion, social comparison and disconnection. She also highlights the conflict in consumption practices between the childhood past and teen future and the lack of homogeneity within this liminal

phase. Waerdahl (2005) focuses more on the sense of tweens' excitement for the future, their "*anticipatory socialisation*", indicating three similar drivers of consumption practice to Turner and Cody: alienation from current reference groups, "*personal ability*" and the desires of new aspirational groups. Again, this indicates the tweens' desire to move towards new peer influences rather than remain with the familiarity of family. Arnett (2006:113) refers to the ages 18-25 as "*emerging adulthood*", a time when "*most young people in this age period feel like neither adolescents nor (fully) adults, but somewhere in between*". He argues that in Europe this age span is characterised by a move to adult roles which are "*highly unstructured and unsettled*". This emerging adulthood is a time where freedom and choice are expected. The characteristics of this group - instability, a time of feeling in-between, a focus on self and an age of possibilities - indicate liminality; these emerging adults are in a "*mysterious darkness*" of change. Gitelson & McDermott (2007) note that this transitional period is lasting longer, and older adolescents' reluctance to leave home impacts on parent-child relationships (Kloep & Hendry 2010). Furstenburg (2010: 80) acknowledges that research into older adolescents focuses on demographic and economic analysis, rather than "*the implications for family life and practices*".

Relationships with possessions have often been a focus of consumption and identity research. Belk (1988) and Wattanasuwan (2005) indicate how possessions become extensions of ourselves or symbols for who we are. Piacentini & Mailer (2004) show how "rites of passage" such as the teen years, are important for defining identity and consumption, Fournier (1998) shows how we have almost human relationships with objects and Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) show how we gain social belonging with a product via the group-self. The mobile phone has become a key possession for teens, Turkle (2011) refers to it as a "*phantom limb*" for them and Katz (2012) as a "*totemic*" object. The Apple iPhone is dominant within this environment, despite warning bells that it is viewed as a parent's phone (Ritson 2012), the iPhone is still the most desired handset for the young (Barnett 2010). Internet access, via apps, has been influential in iPhone's appeal. By 2011, there were 300,000 mobile apps, over 100,000 for iPhones alone (Mintel 2011). The ability to immediately download apps gives the teen choice and customisation of internet access. Overall, smartphones are potentially helping move our focus away from a sole emphasis on conspicuous consumption. Hosea (2012) suggests that digital devices are "*nurturing cultural interests across the population*", as life is no longer just about material goods but gaining experiences, and sharing those experiences via photographs/comments on social networking sites. Recording our lives in this way is driving a desire to experience more and share stories – not just to own items. It is not just the possession rituals (McCracken 1986), which are important but also the process of sharing itself. Warde (2005, p149) argues "*It becomes more important to ask what types of practices are prevalent, and what range of the available practices do different people engage in, as well as what are the typical combinations of practices*". This research seeks to explore the interaction between the female teen, her iPhone and her friends and family to enhance understanding of liminal consumption practices amongst older teens.

Methodology

An interpretivist research paradigm was followed, using a grounded theory approach, to explore nuances of teen behaviour in relation to their smartphone use. Six friendship groups totalling 20 girls from the Edinburgh area participated in June and November 2012. Purposive sampling ensured a cross-section of situations, at the early stages of "emerging adulthood", between last year of school and the end of the first year of university, with all participants being all daily iPhone users.

A two-stage research process was followed. **Stage one** involved participants individually filling in “app diaries” for a week, allowing daily consideration of app interaction, the detail of which may be forgotten in an interview situation (Mitchell et al 2007). The diary entries were unstructured, although broad guidelines were given to encourage detail. Utilising mobile phones for generation of data has been used successfully to aid ethnographic research (Hein & O’Donohoe 2011). In this study, the diary was written on the “notes” app of the iPhone allowing almost spontaneous recording of activity. Each evening, the diary “notes” were emailed to the researcher, via the iPhone, facilitating a quasi-ethnographic approach. **Stage two** research questions were drawn out of the diary findings, following the diary-interview technique (Collis & Hussey 2009) and liminality as a focus developed from this process. Friendship focus groups encouraged greater social interaction and debate and venues were chosen to encourage a relaxed mood. Group interviews were recorded.

Findings and analysis - Liminal lens on emerging adults

Cody (2012) identifies tweens (making the transition from children to teens) having conflicting childish interests and teen aspirations which affect their consumption practices, highlighting that tweens do not neatly fit into one segment but conform to practices in “*liminal market segments*”: transgression, private passions, middle ground mediation and heteronomy and pseudo-control. This study’s findings will be interpreted in line with this established framework. The consumption practices of these “*emerging adults*” conformed in many ways to these liminal segments. In their “*mysterious darkness*”, the young adults were constantly managing change, slowly moving from lives managed by others to greater personal responsibility and peer influence, yet their friends were also changing - creating insecurities in “*communitas*”. In the midst of these changes was their iPhone, offering security and control. This deep connection led to four key demands on the iPhone to assist in managing their consumption practices:

Entertain me was important. Any quiet or “*bored*” time, on the bus, walking or waiting was better accompanied by the iPhone either via games, TV or music. This was not restricted to one medium at a time, the iPhone allowed “polymedia” (Miller 2011), simultaneously using/watching different media, either all via the phone or on the phone and remotely: “*checking what people have tweeted was a way of filling up time in the car whilst listening to my iPod*”. It was also not necessarily a sole pursuit, often bringing family members and/or friends together: “*my mum started playing this one called Bejewelled ... and then I got it and now we just sit and play it... from that my Mum’s boyfriend got it as well and my friends have got it*”. The iPhone allowed the indulging of “*private passions*” (Cody 2012), where the emerging adults were not yet ready to give up their teen activities: playing “Smurfvile”, buying a countdown-to-Christmas app or watching BBC News app on one viewing and teen drama “One Tree Hill” at the next.

If ***Entertain me*** often connected with the past teen, ***Help me*** often prepared for a “*positive transgression*” (Cody 2012) into, as yet, uncertain adulthood, as the iPhone instantly assisted with the management of current lives and studies, future choices and directions/location advice. Interestingly, commercial apps usage was largely limited to those that help with information, such as bus and train timetables rather than store apps, partly to avoid temptation but partly due to dissatisfaction in the past. ***Help me*** assisted in the move from the “*pseudo-control*” (Cody 2012) associated with tweens to a greater sense of independence and control as adults.

Share with me encompassed elements of the liminal segment of Cody's (2012) "*middle-ground mediation*", in this case juggling conflicting information sharing/communications with family and friends. This element was the most important to teenage girls as it allowed them both a sense of control and sense of "communitas" with peers, as well as 24/7 commentary or surveillance of their own, and other's lives. This was via voice/email, photo-sharing and text but also through Facetime, Skype and social media. Facebook was of particular importance for sharing lives via public or private conversations, but also for the management of private peer groups, set up for sharing news, communicating parties and events, oiling the development of a "collective voice" and ensuring conformity to the group. The iPhone also enabled collective support for individuals struggling as they transgress boundaries: *"like, we've got a friend who's at Uni in Southampton and she's really homesick so we'll just send photos of random things to her"*. Although there were times as Turkle (2011) suggests when families were "alone together" such as *"my mum likes me to sit with her even though I don't like the same programmes as her but as long as I am sitting with her I can sit and watch something else on my phone"*, iPhones enabled familial communication, via a private channel: *"it's quite nice, you've got your parents in your pocket!"*. They also enabled event sharing with families such as Ball photos and *"filmed my cousin running, sent it to my nana, sent same video and some pictures to my uncle"*. The iPhone was a portal allowing teens to control and compartmentalise, involving family or friends as **they** chose.

This ability to manage multiple selves led to the demand, ***Never leave me***. The iPhone was a constant friend, giving habitual reassurance: *"you don't really notice you are using it, it just helps you out with everyday things"*. The girls referred to their iPhone as *"my twin"*, *"my best friend"*, *"my right arm"*, *"I feel naked without it"*, they gave their phone's names, slept with it charging next to them or under their pillow, it was the first thing they saw in the morning and the last thing they touched at night. The word *"trust"* was used frequently; the iPhone was a constant presence in their changing world, discretely connecting their past and future, private and public, work and play, family and peer lives, bringing so many perceived benefits that on the dark side they feel lost without it: *"they took up to two weeks to replace it and it was, like, the worst two weeks ever ... I felt so disconnected"*

Conclusions – Securitas in the fruitful darkness

The study is limited to girls to allow comparison with previous studies and focus was only on more middle class teens following an academic career path. As Turkle (2011) suggests, we, and especially the young, need to ensure we manage technology, rather than allowing it to exploit and dominate us, so an understanding of iPhone consumption during liminality becomes important. The journey from teen to adult occurs at a powerful time of physical and emotional change, decisions made now impact on life courses. A trusted object assisting in this "*fruitful darkness*" was the iPhone, shaping the ebbs and flows of peer and family relationships and routines to create new yet paradoxically, deeply rooted consumption practices: *"my parents text me in the morning to tell me to get up"*. As far back as 1964, McLuhan refers to the man/technology relationship as: *"an extension of his physical body"*, an idea echoed by Belk (1988) about possessions. Ahuvia (2005) talks of growing to love objects because they resolve our identity conflicts. Undoubtedly, in this study the iPhone as an object is an extension of self and *is loved/"cool"* but it is more than this, or the *"social object"* (Katz 2012) or *"best friend"* of Fournier (1998). The Roman goddess Securitas promoted stability in lives, and the iPhone performed a similar role for the teenage girls: a trusted personal body guard allowing the management of a portal to the world - friends, family and other brand relationships - giving a sense of choice and real control, which is unusual, and particularly valuable, at a time of great change.

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